



Busting the Myths About the North Korea Problem

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North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-il passed away on December 17, 2011. His servants followed his will to crown his 28-year-old son, Kim Jong-un, as the “Great Successor” to the Kim family dynasty. Skepticism abounds about the “untested” young emperor's ability to continue dynastic rule in North Korea. There are also speculations that an internal power struggle may soon engulf the military-dominated regime. Moreover, decades of political repression and economic hardship could have already prepared the ground for mass rebellion in North Korea. A collapse of this hollow fortress may be imminent.

However, Kim's followers and the young emperor defied the odds and staged an uninterrupted transition of power in Pyongyang. As the world moved into 2012, the new regime also claimed that this would be the inaugural year for North Korea to become a “prosperous great power.” Kim Jong-un, unlike his father who observed a 3-year period of mourning over the passing of Kim Il-sung—the founder of the Kim Dynasty and Kim Jong-un's grandpa—before assuming official duties in the mid-1990s, aggressively reached out to impress his subjects. Kim Jong-un's first public appearance after the state funeral was a visit to the North Korean military's 105th Tank Division. This elite unit was the first North Korean force to charge into Seoul during the Korean War 60 years ago. The significance of this visit is self-evident.

More beguilingly, on January 8, 2012, Kim Jong-un's 29th birthday, North Korean official television showed footage of the newly-dubbed “Supreme Commander” interacting with North Korean military forces. He was shown at great ease with the military generals, riding a horse, in the

pilot's seat of a military helicopter, reviewing live-firing of artillery, and the most significant of all, driving a camouflaged tank and ostensibly firing shots along the way.

In the meantime, North Korean media also tried to present the young Kim's lovable and benevolent face by showing him getting on a free-fall tower at an amusement park and releasing his hand-written reply to a letter from the teachers and students of the Kim Il-sung University commemorating the late dictator.

North Korea's propaganda clearly intends to show the world that the power transition in North Korea is going well, and the young successor is in charge. Moreover, it also intends to show that the new emperor is much more capable than his predecessors (for instance, Kim Jong-il had a fear of flying, but the "Great Successor" is presumably not). All of these points unmistakably suggest that the decade-old North Korea problem is gaining a new lease on life: the preservation of the Kim dynasty and totalitarian rule in North Korea; continuation of the unfinished wars on the Korean Peninsula (the Korean War as well as the Cold War); North Korea's unyielding efforts to develop nuclear weapons; and, many other recalcitrant acts will all continue unabated.

The perpetuation of the North Korea problem has cast a dark shadow over the future of security and stability in Northeast Asia. But what can be done about it? This is a troubling question to the region's great powers, namely the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea. But the one that is most troubled is the United States, because the United States is North Korea's arch enemy and the antithesis of the North Korea problem (it surely takes two to tangle). For well over 60 years, the United States has sought in vain to resolve the North Korea problem on U.S. terms. Unfortunately, as things stand now, there is not much the United States can do to stop the continuation of this problem.

Many factors can be linked to this failure, but the most instrumental ones are perhaps the erroneous or unrealistic assumptions behind the U.S. objectives and approaches toward North Korea. A case can be made that the United States will not be able to make progress on settling the North Korea problem if it continues to operate under the illusions generated by long-held fairy myths concerning this issue (the following are in no particular order).

Myth # 1: The Kim regime will not last; and the United States will not deal with North Korea as a normal member of the international community until the Kim regime is changed (into a democracy presumably).

Unfortunately, the Kim dictators have outlasted many U.S. administrations. Now that a 29-year-old new emperor has come to the throne, the United States will have a long wait before its wish may come true. Ironically, the United States as North Korea's nemesis provides the Kim regime the most-needed excuse to hold its ground, to sustain its Songun (military-first) policy, and to subject the North Koreans to a revolutionary cause against the United States at the expense of their basic human rights.

The Kim regime nevertheless is vulnerable to internal changes. The most-speculated one is a power struggle among Kim's followers. In-house fighting is part of political life everywhere, and there is no exception in North Korea. An internal power struggle could rattle the Kim regime, but given the nature of the Kim regime and its perceived hostile surroundings, it is most likely that whomever emerges from the struggle would have to keep the Kim emperor in place. This Kim dynasty, after all, derives its legitimacy from an unbroken line of struggle against the United States since the Korean War 60 years ago. As long as the United States has a hostile attitude toward North Korea, Kim's followers will have no choice but to support the Kim regime and its totalitarian rule of North Korea.

On a different note, a military *coup d'état* could bring drastic change to the Kim regime. But the chance for this scenario is arguably slim. Additionally, there is no guarantee that a military government would be any more friendly to the United States than the current government, or that it readily turn North Korea into a democracy.

Many also hope that North Korea would follow China's example to reform and open itself up to the outside world. Clearly, the United States would find it easier to deal with a more open North Korea. However, hope is not good policy and the United States will likely be disappointed on several accounts. First, reform is difficult in North Korea especially due to its antagonistic policies toward the United States. The Kim regime is also concerned that reform will undermine its control of the people and lead to its eventual downfall. Kim Jong-il had, in fact, made several attempts to reform North Korea's economy while he was challenging the United States. His frequent visits to China in recent years were intended to learn more about China's reforms and development than about the North Korea problem with the United States—as many had speculated. But so far, North Korea's “reform” has been characterized by one-step-forward-two-steps-backward muddling. The young Kim could continue his father's business, but he would have to overcome many obstacles that the late Kim Jong-il failed to do. It is not clear at this point whether he would have the support from his followers or the political skills to do so.

Additionally, reform and change take time. Patience is a scarce commodity in the United States. No U.S. president has the patience to wait for something that promises no quick returns.

Finally, one should bear in mind that the Chinese model does not promise regime change.

For these reasons and many more, the United States will be unable to make progress toward settling the North Korea problem based on the hope of a North Korean regime collapse or change.

Myth # 2: The United States can bring the North Korean regime to its knees by applying heavy pressures from outside.

Nothing can be further from the truth. The United States does not have any effective means to influence North Korea. Political condemnation, military deterrence, and economic sanctions have had very little impact on the North Korean regime.

An Operation IRAQI FREEDOM replay in North Korea could be gratifying. Yet there is much doubt that the United States has the resources to do it again, particularly at this time. Moreover, with China and Russia opposing any heavy-handed approach in North Korea, U.S. pressure will only be manifested in words, but not in action.

Myth # 3: The United States can negotiate an end to North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons.

This will never happen. To appreciate this, the United States must understand why North Korea pursues nuclear power in the first place. It is a conventional view in the United States that North Korea is developing nuclear weapon for two main reasons. The primary one is to bolster its defiance against the United States and ensure its regime survival. With a nuclear arsenal, the North Korean leaders are said to believe that the United States would not contemplate an invasion of the recalcitrant regime. Indeed, the Iraq and Libya examples stand as deadly warnings to the North Korean leadership. The other reason why the North Korean regime is developing nuclear weapons is its desire to use them as bargaining chips to obtain U.S. and international aid and concessions at the negotiation table.

These two accounts are both correct. But most fail to see that North Korea's ambition is much larger. Deep in its calculation, North Korea wants to become a nuclear power so that it can stand as an “equal” with the great powers around it. One should bear in mind that the Korean Peninsula is

sandwiched among the world's most powerful states in Northeast Asia, and has been the target of great power invasions for centuries. A strong motherland for the Koreans, north and south alike, is a dream that is no different from the aspirations of any other people in similar situations.

Indeed, North Korea's propaganda has put forward praises of Kim Jong-il's contributions during his 17-year reign. Top on the list is the development of nuclear weapons and the missiles that are designed to deliver them. In the meantime, there have been reports that many in South Korea privately acknowledge that it may not be a bad thing for North Korea to acquire a nuclear capability, because by the time the two Koreas come together, a nuclear capability will be an indispensable element of national power of the unified Korea.

In the last 15 years, North Korea has undeniably pursued nuclear power for the two short-term reasons. But once it crossed the threshold of possessing nuclear weapons, North Korea had started to demand that it be treated as a nuclear power. Negotiations with the United States and the other members of the Six-Party Talks, as North Korea has repeatedly claimed, should be about nuclear arms control involving all the parties in this bargain, not nuclear disarmament for just North Korea alone. As North Korea expands its nuclear potential, its long-term ambition has also come into view. There is ample evidence that North Korea may never give up its “hard-earned” capability. Negotiations will only be a North Korean tactic to bargain for time and concessions.

On a practical note, it is unrealistic to expect a weaker power to disarm first in its confrontation with a much stronger opponent. The United States has insisted all along that North Korea agree to a “complete, verifiable, and irreversible destruction of its nuclear weapons program” as a precondition for normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations. This is sheer wishful thinking. North Korea, on the other hand, insists that the United States must first end the Korean War, sign a peace treaty, and normalize relations with North Korea, and then the two nations can discuss the nuclear weapons issue. This childish play between the United States and North Korea has created a stalemate in the Six-Party Talks for years and there is no end to it in sight.

Myth # 4: The Six-Party Talks can solve the North Korea nuclear issue.

This is a poor understanding of this complicated problem.

North Korea has never wanted to participate with this “tribunal” where it has to face five “determined judges” all trying to get it to accept the “sentence of nuclear disarmament.” At every instance, North Korea presented an excuse and then walked away from the Six-Party Talks.

North Korea has always insisted that the North Korea problem and its nuclear byproduct are issues between North Korea and the United States. Consequently, the negotiations should occur between these two countries, not with all the rest. It was only because the United States refused to do so and the recurring tensions in the Korean Peninsula that drove the two to the brink of war when North Korea reluctantly came to the Six-Party Talks. Nevertheless, North Korea continues to seek bilateral deals with the United States whenever it can.

In spite of its objection to the Six-Party Talks, North Korea has nevertheless found a way to take advantage of this protracted “talk shop.” It is painfully clear that North Korea had been stalling for time to continue its nuclear weapons development while the talks were going on. The nuclear tests were conducted regardless of the condemnations from the Six-Party Talks members. In addition, North Korea has also turned the Six-Party Talks into a market for U.S. and international aid. It is no joke to say that the longer the talks go on, the more advances North Korea makes with its nuclear capabilities; and the longer the North Korean regime survives.

Aside from the problems with North Korea, the Six-Party Talks as a multilateral effort has some inherent defects. The parties coming to the talks have different interests and objectives, and they bring different approaches to bear on the process. Japan for instance, is more interested in trying to gain release of the abductees from North Korea. Its insistence on getting this issue on the agenda has been a distraction. Russia's motivation to participate in the talks is not to be a problem solver, but to keep its presence in East Asia. China also has its own calculations (see more about China below). In many ways, the Six-Party Talks is a perfect example of “stag hunt,” with no binding agreement among the “hunters” but plenty of self interest for them to be distracted from pursuing the common good.

Moreover, almost all of the so-called “consensuses” coming out of the talks are nonbinding. Neither do the parties have any “red lines” that North Korea should absolutely not cross. Thus, when North Korea walked out of the talks and refused to abide by the agreements, the parties did not have any effective means to hold North Korea accountable.

For better and for worse, the Six-Party Talks is still the best place for the conflicting parties to resume negotiations after their hostile confrontations. It will continue to be a talk shop, but the promise of these talks to resolve the North Korea problem will only remain a false hope.

Myth # 5: China has control over North Korea. The United States can get China to act as a responsible stakeholder and join hands with the United States to force change in North Korea.

China has never had control of North Korea and will never try. On the contrary, China has to carefully handle its relations with the North Korean regime. China's guarded reactions to North Korea's reckless acts over the years and even the nuclear tests are prime examples. In 2011, the ailing Kim Jong-il made three visits to China. Chinese President Hu Jintao cautiously took the opportunity to propose that North Korea and China “strengthen strategic communications on matters of grave importance.” As all Sinologists know, one must always perceive the opposite meaning of Chinese statements. The message behind President Hu's proposal is that North Korea never consults or informs China of its reckless acts. Indeed, North Korea has caught China off guard many times. China cannot tell the North Korean regime to stop those acts; it can only ask North Korea to cooperate.

Unlike the United States, which deals with North Korea in ideological terms, China pursues its interests in Northeast Asia in practical ways. China's overarching interest is to take the next 30 years to turn itself into a true great power. In order to achieve this goal, China has tried hard to preserve a favorable environment in its surroundings. Maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula is part of this strategy.

When Kim Jong-un became the new ruler in North Korea, China was the first to recognize the new regime. China did not do this to give the Kim regime unconditional support. It was an attempt to stabilize the situation in North Korea.

China has always opposed the U.S. heavy-handed approach toward North Korea. China's opposition to U.S. policy is not due to ideological reasons to protect the North Korean regime, but because it is afraid that U.S. heavy-handed pressures may intensify the confrontations in the peninsula and jeopardize China's interests.

China does not see eye to eye with the United States on the North Korea problem. It has always maintained that this problem is between the United States and North Korea, and the two should settle their problems directly. China will never join hands with the United States to put pressure on North Korea. China knows well that Americans come and go, but China and North Korea are neighbors and have to live with each other. For what reason would China jeopardize its relations with North Korea in favor of the United States?

China embraced the U.S. call for it to become a responsible stakeholder. However, China has also made it clear that it will not be a responsible stakeholder for U.S. interests only. China will cooperate with the United States only when its own interest dictate. In reference to the North Korea issue, China shares some common interests with the United States; both stand for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and want to preserve peace and stability in the Northeast Asia region. However, China and the United States are still oceans apart on the precise meaning of these interests and the approaches to settle these issues. So far, China has been playing the role of a facilitator on the Six-Party Talks. It will continue to play this role to make sure that even if the North Korea problem does not get resolved, at least it will not jeopardize China's grand strategy.

Time for the United States to take a new course of action?

Wait until the presidential election is over. President Obama has missed the opportunity to do so in the last 3 years. As the general election cycle is moving into full gear in the United States, no one is interested in taking on the North Korea problem at this time.

But sooner or later, the United States will have to deal with the North Korea problem again. A new course of action should be on the agenda. This approach should go to the root of the problem. In considering this refreshed move on North Korea, the United States should bear the following in mind:

- The United States is part of the North Korea problem and should find a way to get out of it. The North Korea problem is more of a liability than an asset for U.S. foreign policies in East Asia.
- The United States should not wait for a regime change in North Korea to take a new course of action. We have done that before. When President Richard Nixon made his historic visit to China in 1972, the communist regime there was much worse than the one in North Korea today.

- North Korea is not the most isolated country in the world. It has diplomatic relations with over 160 nations, including all the European nations except France. North Korea is also a full member of the United Nations. There is no reason for the United States to withhold recognition of North Korea any longer.
- The United States should not count on the Six-Party Talks to resolve the North Korea problem. The shortest route to the solution of the North Korea problem is the one between Pyongyang and Washington, but not one that goes through Beijing.

In addition to the points provided above, the United States should take the next opportunity to deal directly with North Korea. The first thing to do is to normalize relations with North Korea by ending the pretentious wars on the Korean Peninsula (the Korean War and Cold War). The second thing is to do business with North Korea. Let money talk. It can be a much more effective means to change North Korea than arms.

This new course of action should help to relieve the United States from the North Korea problem. With the removal of hostility, North Korea will have no excuse to continue its nuclear weapons development. The eventual denuclearization in North Korea will then become an issue for the Northeast Asian nations. The United States can reengage in this issue as an off-shore balancer with much strategic flexibility.

Peace, security, and economic prosperity in Northeast Asia are vital interests of the United States. The United States will continue to maintain the capacity to safeguard these interests. This new course of action will allow the United States to carry out its mission more productively.

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